AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF

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Optimizing Africa's Security Force Structures

By Helmoed Heitman

◆ **African security forces must be able to counter and defeat experienced, highly mobile, and well-armed irregular forces that are often tightly embedded with local communities.**

◆ **Security forces must be demonstrably competent and professional if they are to be accepted by local populations, whose support is indispensible to defeating irregular forces.**

◆ **Small units of balanced general purpose forces capable of conducting operations over dispersed territory without support are key to effective force design when facing irregular forces.**

HIGHLIGHTS

There is much happening in Africa that is positive—economically, socially, and politically. But a large share of the continent remains fragile, putting those gains at risk. The most pressing challenges facing many African states are paramilitary threats—threats that are beyond the ability of most police forces and frequently transcend national borders. Organized crime, rural banditry, piracy, local warlords, guerrillas, ethnic and religious violence, and extremist Islamist groups are just a few of an array of such threats.

These paramilitary threats are growing in size and scope. Organized crime is increasingly linked to narcotics trafficking from South America through West Africa and from Asia through East Africa—a trade now running in the tens of billions of dollars. Oil theft ("bunkering") amounts to 10 percent of

Nigeria's total oil production. Moreover, illegal fishing costs the continent $1 billion annually. Illegal logging and mining, arms trafficking, and general smuggling further add to the dimension and complexity of these threats.

Irregular forces include guerrillas fighting perceived disenfranchisement (Darfur) or injustice (Niger Delta), for secession (Cabinda, Angola, and Casamance, Senegal), or for other causes. They also comprise militias protecting territory and resources (the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]), private armies hired by illegal miners, loggers, and smugglers, and groups with no rational cause (the Lord's Resistance Army). There is also a growing problem of terrorism, including groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Shabaab in Somalia, and efforts by international

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Islamist terrorist groups to establish themselves elsewhere in Africa.

Many of these irregular forces—whether criminal or guerrilla—are dangerous opponents. They are highly experienced in bush war and are well armed with assault rifles, RPG–7s, and heavy machineguns. Moreover, they are highly mobile in four-wheel-drive vehicles and well equipped with global positioning systems, night vision goggles, and satellite telephones. A few may have man-portable antiaircraft missiles. In 2002, terrorists fired two SA–7s at an Israeli airliner in Mombasa, and in 1996, cattle rustlers used one to shoot down a Kenyan police helicopter, killing all on board. Some are supported by neighboring countries, enabling access to even better equipment. General Laurent Nkunda's forces in the eastern DRC had T–55 tanks and field artillery. Guerrillas in the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, and Uganda have been supplied and even deployed by air. Some smugglers are using air transport extensively.

There also seems to be a trend toward collaboration. The operations of AQIM, Tuareg rebels, and smugglers in Mali and Niger are increasingly intertwined. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta has developed symbiotic relationships with bunkering gangs in Nigeria and guerrillas in Cameroon's Bakassi Peninsula. Al

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Shabaab derives some of its funding from piracy off the coast of Somalia.

Most of the states in the region lack forces able to counter these threats, mainly because they cannot afford them. Compounding this issue is the fact that the equipment of their armed forces is often

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not suited to the type of operations they confront. Nor are these problems sufficiently addressed by security assistance initiatives or typical security sector reform programs, which tend to focus on downsizing rather than optimizing security forces. New force structures are needed to confront these challenges. Africa must develop security forces that are context appropriate, adequate to deal with current and likely threats, and affordable.

GEOGRAPHIC, DEMOGRAPHIC, CULTURAL, AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The obvious geographic challenge is the size of most African countries. Côte d'Ivoire is larger than Italy, Sudan's Darfur region is the size of Spain, the CAR and Somalia are each the size of France, Chad is twice the size of France, and the DRC is twice the size of France and Spain combined. Difficult terrain and climate, poor transport infrastructure, and low rural population density often compound the problem.

A key demographic challenge is rapid urbanization, resulting in concentrations of unemployed youth in cities and towns, presenting a pool of potential recruits to criminal and guerrilla groups. It also spawns growing informal settlements that present tactical challenges: difficult navigation, roads easily blocked by ditches, civilians who cannot escape fighting, homes vulnerable to penetration by most munitions, and the risk of fire among flimsy structures.

Cultural challenges include ethnic, linguistic, religious, and tribal differences. Moreover, security forces must typically overcome disconnects between rural villagers and a predominantly urban officer class.

Most African countries are also extremely poor, finding it difficult to meet the legitimate aspirations of their people. The resulting discontent is easily exploited by criminals, warlords, and some politicians, with obvious security implications. Poverty also makes it difficult to fund adequate forces. CAR, with a population of 4.5 million, spent only $18 million for defense in 2007. Chad, with 10.3 million people, committed only $70 million. Even relatively prosperous Kenya, with 39 million people, expended a modest $681

million. The result is security forces far too small and ill equipped for their responsibilities.

APPROPRIATE, ADEQUATE, AND AFFORDABLE FORCES

The fundamental requirement for security forces is to prevent security threats from arising at all, by deterrence or preemption, and to respond effectively to such threats that do materialize. In Africa, this must be achieved within tight funding constraints, expansive geographic areas, and poor transportation infrastructure. That will demand some unconventional thinking.

African countries face highly diverse security threats and have quite different security requirements. There is no "one size fits all" or even "one style suits all" solution. Nevertheless, given the nature of many of these threats, most operations will be constabulary or counterinsurgency in nature. Some fundamental requirements can be identified on that basis.

Acceptance and trust by the people, without which effective operations against groups moving and operating among the people are not possible. Security forces must be thoroughly embedded and *engaged* with the local population, willing and able to assist in times of need. The people must see themselves reflected in the security forces and see them as a friend and helper. This requires focused recruiting, training to enable troops to assist the people, and ensuring that troops are aware of local customs and can converse in local dialects. Reservists living in an area can be immensely valuable in this respect.

Security forces must also be demonstrably competent if they are to be accepted by local communities. That demands a focus on professionalism, particularly for officers and noncommissioned officers. Security forces must also be visibly honest.

> ## "security forces must be thoroughly embedded and *engaged* with the local population"

This demands careful selection, education, rigorous monitoring, competitive salaries and service conditions, and reliable administration to make petty corruption unnecessary. Finally, they must

be politically neutral, which demands great care to ensure that senior appointments are clearly based on professional considerations.

Sustained presence, without which security forces will not be able to protect and support the population, discourage organized crime and formation of irregular forces, and develop popular support. This is fundamental to policing and should be equally so to constabulary or stability operations. Forces of appropriate strength that are properly tasked, trained, and equipped can provide effective protection against bandits and guerrillas, develop intelligence, defuse dissatisfaction by assisting the people, and keep government authorities apprised of critical needs. A well-considered basing strategy that permits quick access to the population but does not impede its daily activity must, therefore, be part of any force design.

Current, comprehensive intelligence, without which small security forces cannot be effective. Security forces must fully understand their opponents *and* the social environment within which they must operate. That requires continuously updated intelligence to enable security forces to monitor trends, highlight relevant developments, predict potential threats, and develop situational assessments.

Security forces must also have current operational and tactical intelligence to be effective against elusive and wary opponents. This requires effective collection, collation, and distribution, and an information-intelligence-action cycle run at the lowest possible unit level. A typical bureaucratic intelligence system that provides intelligence long after it might have been useful will not suffice.

DESIGNING BALANCED GENERAL PURPOSE FORCES

Against this background, it is possible to develop some concepts that can be widely applicable as a starting point for a tailored force design (see table). This will be complemented by specialized force elements including airpower and, depending on the particular country, maritime elements.

The reality faced by most African security sectors is that small force elements must be able to conduct operations without support. Dispersed deployment will be essential for presence and to develop and main-

tain a usable intelligence picture. Meanwhile, quick reinforcement will be difficult at best. Poor roads will in many cases make it difficult to deploy and sustain large forces. All force elements must, therefore, have *balanced general purpose* combat capabilities and protected mobility. Fire support will require long range (to support dispersed forces deployed or patrolling far from base), lightweight ammunition (to offset supply problems), and precision (for efficient use of munitions and to avoid collateral casualties and damage).

Several South African examples exemplify this approach.

The Modular Battalion. An infantry battalion whose number of companies, armored cars, mounted or motorcycle troops, engineers, and other attached elements varied depending on its area of responsibility (AOR). Each company in turn was also modular in structure, often with five infantry platoons and one of armored cars as well as some Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) for mobile patrols. Such modularity allowed each battalion and company to be tailored precisely to its AOR—size, terrain, roads, population density—and to conduct a range of operations with its own resources.

The Battalion Group. A mechanized or motorized infantry battalion with an integral armored car company, artillery battery, and engineers. Even light infantry units were organized as battalion groups with an armored car company, an artillery battery, and some APCs for mobility when not engaged in foot operations. This versatile yet light structure took cognizance of the fact that battalion level units would often have to operate far from other units or

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supporting arms and gave them the inherent internal flexibility to do so effectively. This also virtually eliminated common problems that came with temporarily attaching elements of different arms to a unit.

Another example is Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Battalion, formed specifically to counter rural banditry and having its own air component with light aircraft and helicopters. It has proven successful in large part because of its specific doctrinal and organizational focus on combating paramilitary opponents rather than conventional military operations. It also has a range of in-house capabilities that enable it to respond quickly and flexibly as a situation develops without having to request support attachments and wait for their arrival.

At a higher organizational level is the French army example of the "demi-brigade," and at a lower level many armies use "half-battalions," "company groups," and "half-companies" to good effect. The key is a balance of capabilities that match an array of likely tactical requirements.

In addition to balanced capabilities, force design must at all levels provide for:

- ◆ operational, tactical, and logistical mobility and agility, to allow prompt and quick focusing of combat power to seize fleeting opportunities to engage elusive opponents

- ◆ rapid and sustained dominance in an AOR, including the elasticity (strength and logistics) and flexibility (balanced capabilities) to extend deployments in time or area and to adapt deployments as a situation develops

- ◆ precision firepower, to enable small, dispersed forces to overmatch and quickly overwhelm opponents and minimize collateral casualties and damage

- ◆ assured communications, using aerial relay when conditions require it

- ◆ assured logistic support that takes into account the difficulties of movement over poor roads and the very real risk of ambush or interruption of logistic routes.

In most African countries, optimal force design will comprise a mix of permanently deployed force elements with responsibility for assigned sectors and mobile force elements that can be shifted to adapt force density or serve as reaction forces when needed.

Operational Challenges	Force Design Implications
Many irregular groups present a significant military threat, at least at a tactical level.	Counter and defeat opponents at a military level, which require sufficient capacity and assets to overmatch opponents. There is no excuse for sending government forces to a "fair fight."
Irregular forces are often more criminal than military, requiring an appropriate mindset to counter them.	Understand and counter irregular forces' criminal intent and activities.
Most irregular forces are well embedded within the population, voluntarily or through intimidation, and have good local knowledge.	Engage destabilizing forces in populated areas without undue collateral casualties or damage.
	Security forces must be broadly representative, aware of cultural issues, and able to communicate in local dialects.
	Personnel must be educated and trained to high standards to enable small, dispersed force elements to be effective against varied threats.
Many irregular forces are very mobile, on foot in forests or mountainous terrain or in four-wheel-drive vehicles.	Enhanced mobility—on foot, by vehicle, and by air—is a key force multiplier.
Most irregular forces have adequate communications for command and control.	Deployed force elements must have balanced capabilities (infantry, armor, engineers, communications, and so forth) to handle immediate tasks, avoid time-consuming attachments or reinforcements, and offset inadequate overall strength, dispersed deployment, and mobility constraints.
Distances can render radio communications tenuous, requiring special measures.	
Difficult terrain and weather will hamper operations. Moreover, informal settlements present a particularly important and complex challenge.	Specialized force elements for certain terrain types (forest, mountain, river, informal settlements) are needed.
Good intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance are difficult to provide, particularly in rural and border areas.	Intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance capability are required at all levels. Basing and deployment decisions must offset mobility constraints.
Operational, tactical, and logistical maneuverability is difficult and slow.	
States have insufficient force densities and elements to counter multiple threats.	Equipment that balances capability, supportability, and affordability is required.

The permanently deployed force elements will in most cases best be modular battalions with company and perhaps half-company bases in key parts of their AOR. They can be supported by a mobile element that would conduct pseudo-random patrols throughout the battalion area to confuse opponents, vary force density within selected zones, and serve as a reaction force. Reinforced platoons may suffice for some outposts, although there always should be two commissioned officers, one to lead patrols while the other ensures command and control. Effective village protection can even be provided by reinforced infantry sections. In each case, however, such small force elements must be assured of prompt support—for their own protection and to ensure their credibility.

Whether the mobile elements of the modular battalions are mechanized or motorized will depend on the terrain, nature of the opponent, and available funding. The aim should be to overmatch likely opponents in mobility and firepower, while also ensuring force protection. In most cases, simple, easily maintained, and affordable mine-protected APCs should suffice. Full-scale Mine Resistant Ambush Protected–type vehicles will be required only where forces cannot conveniently move off road, and thus become vulnerable to improvised explosive device attacks. In particularly difficult terrain, these force elements may best comprise light infantry deployed and supported by vehicle or helicopter.

The main mobile operations forces will in most cases best be battalion groups or company groups that

employ high-mobility operations concepts and tactics. The key to their effectiveness will lie in mobile thinking and then translating that into doctrine and detailed organization.

Wherever possible, all mobile force elements should exploit their asymmetric edge over light opposing forces. There is nothing quite as asymmetric as an armored combat vehicle engaging a guerrilla on foot. The South African "mechanized follow-up" concept provides one example. It was based on combining a short intelligence cycle at platoon level,

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tracking skills, and the mobility, firepower, and protection of mine-protected APCs. This was supported by helicopters for reconnaissance, command and control, and fire support. Such a combination was extremely difficult for guerrillas to counter.

Specialized Force Elements. In some situations, it will be worth developing specialized units to complement conventional forces. Each situation will demand its own solution, but among the concepts that have proven tactically effective and cost-efficient in multiple conflicts are the deployment of special forces teams to live with remote rural communities, assisting and protecting them while also developing an intelligence picture; the deployment of detachments to live in and protect rural villages; and the development of local self-protection forces.

Theaters with long lines of communication will require careful thought to adequately protect logistic movements. Convoys and checkpoints alone will not suffice against competent opponents. There will also need to be mobile force elements conducting pseudo-random patrols of the areas through which those lines of communication run.

Airpower. With the continent's large theaters, low force densities, and poor road links, airpower can be a critical factor and provide an asymmetric edge in

Africa. Given the cost of airpower, however, the focus should be on a combination of low-cost turboprop aircraft and affordable high-tech systems to provide essential capabilities such as:

- ◆ reconnaissance, surveillance, and communications intelligence, using single- or twin-engine utility aircraft with optronic turrets and basic communications intelligence systems. Unmanned aerial vehicles are an option but often not as inexpensive or simple as they appear.

- ◆ transport, to deploy and support force elements, including light vehicles. It is not helpful to fly in and then have to move 100 kilometers or more on foot while the opponent departs or even to maneuver using four-wheel-drive vehicles.

- ◆ tactical helicopter mobility, preferably for at least two platoons in a single lift to ensure an effective element on the ground, and, when possible, with support by armed helicopters

- ◆ combat air support, using armed turboprop trainers and light fixed-wing gunships with low-cost precision weapons for an optimal mix of persistence, firepower, and affordability

- ◆ airspace control, using a mix of observation posts, transportable stealthy radars, and low-cost turboprop interceptor aircraft to prevent irregular forces making use of air transport.

Maritime Elements. Most African countries depend on seaborne trade, fishing, and other offshore industries but lack effective navies or coast guards. This applies equally to countries with long lake borders or major riverine transport systems. Even small rivers can be used as smuggling routes by light craft and must be secured. As with airpower, low-cost systems that give the required minimum capability should be prioritized. Maritime security capabilities

will have to be developed in phases as funding allows and operational experience makes practicable:

- ◆ security around ports and inshore fishing grounds, using light inshore patrol craft with only very basic systems and light weapons but capable of night operations to deter smuggling

- ◆ prevention of over-the-beach smuggling, which will require seacraft of some endurance, ideally with support by light surveillance aircraft (even single-engine types will suffice)

- ◆ protection of offshore assets, which will require larger vessels, 45 to 90 meters depending on the typical sea condition and distance to those assets. Protection will best be performed by a combination of patrol vessels and surveillance aircraft, which can be light twin turboprops. This might be handled in collaboration with fishing and oil companies or funded directly by a tax on their activities.

- ◆ protection of the Exclusive Economic Zone, which can essentially be an extension of the protection of offshore assets.

MILITARY OR PARAMILITARY?

Much of what African security forces will have to do over the medium term will be either constabulary or counterinsurgency in nature and will not require a full-scale military. In fact, a force that starts out with a policing mindset might well be better than a conventional military. A military will inevitably run the risk of comparing itself to and benchmarking itself against the armed forces of larger countries, which face entirely different challenges.

African countries should, therefore, consider whether they might not do better with a constabulary or gendarmerie that incorporates civil police, paramilitary units, coast guard, air patrol, and transport elements rather than separate police and armed forces. A paramilitary force of this type would also amalgamate a full range of capabilities within a single organization, eliminating the inevitable duplications of having both police and military.

This approach might, of course, simply not be practicable politically. That still leaves the option of the European example: a paramilitary gendarmerie that is part of the military but has a policing focus and reports to the interior ministry in times of peace. During conflict or war, that type of force provides security and rear area protection, and its specialist antiterrorist elements complement military special forces. This approach will be more expensive than a single force but would bring the best of both worlds.

CONCLUSION

African security forces will face varied challenges over the medium term, few of them of a kind to be found in most manuals. They will need to apply imaginative thinking and to FOCUS: Focus on their mission, Optimize their force structure, Control operations tightly, Understand what is actually happening (not what they might like to be happening), and Seize tactical and operational opportunities as they arise.

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